

Filming the «Discovery» of America: How and Whose History Is Being Told

LUISELA ALVARAY

The past is modifiable, J. L. Borges

At that moment, it was Rodrigo de Triana who shouted «Tierra! tierra!...» meaning that land could be seen on the horizon., That cry signaled the beginning of a continuous enterprise carried out through a period that from then on has been called the Discovery and Conquest of America. The shaping of this endeavor has relied upon innumerable chronicles narrated then by both priests and conquistadores of the time. Beyond the written accounts later summarized by historians, there have been a considerable number of films related to this epoch.¹ My attraction to these kinds of films shares two sets of questions certainly not unrelated. First, a theoretical inquiry connected to the controversial existence of film representations of History- to their validity as historical accounts- which will necessarily take me to the more general question of the conception of History itself: Are historical representations different from other discourses? Can they be connected to certain film styles? My second set of questions are ideological and connected to the actual signification conveyed through the films that will inform this analysis: Whose histories are being told and from whose point of view? Tracing out and mapping these questions will be the main purpose of this treacherous journey.

As a point of departure, I will take a particular film, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972, dir. Werner Herzog), which tells the story of the Spanish conquistador Lope de Aguirre in his journey through the Amazon river in 1561. This event has been subject to numerous controversies, and Herzog's work is the only film representation that has been made up to now. However, to talk about this film I am going to rely on some of the theoretical parameters that relate to narrative and the representation of history as Hayden White presents them in his article «The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality».²

White's article examines the notion of objective history as interrogated by modern historiography. He points out that it is easy to equate truth with reality when the events recounted are represented as a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. But furthermore, White reveals that legitimizing history through a closed-structured narrative follows a desire of «coherency, integrity, and fullness» and implies an «authority» behind the text.

White goes on to argue that what historians have often deemed to be as the most realistic form of representing reality has been determined by the «legality» of a social system-the moral paradigms of an authority.

The events that are actually recorded in the narrative appear «real» precisely insofar as they belong to an order of moral existence, just as they derive their meaning from their placement in this order ...And only a moral authority could justify the turn in the narrative which permits it to come to an end... Where in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too.³

One of White's concluding remarks suggests that the validation of history through narrativity brings historical texts into the realm of the imagination. Factual events are not normally perceived as well-made stories; making meaning out of our perception of the world is a process by which we organize a factual reality that was not previously narrativized. Such narrativization implies the «establishment of a moral authority without which the notion of specifically social reality would be unthinkable.»⁴ For White, the notions of History and Fiction come closer through the organizing principles of narrativity.

Following these premises, I am going to determine the validity of Herzog's film as a historical account and the «legalities» -«moralities» that it implies. I will then attempt a general characterization of film representations of history.

Aguirre, the Wrath of God is narrated by the monk Gaspar de Carvajal whose chronicle, it is said in the film, is the only surviving one of the journey. He is participating in the story that is taking place-a story that is told by a voice over throughout the film.⁵ However, the truth of the matter is that de Carvajal did not write such a story. Moreover, at least six written chronicles of this journey do exist and have been compiled in a single book.⁶ The six chronicles, however, do not tell the same story. «In general, they were written to defend different interests. This is why the chronicles contradict each other in many ways. »⁷ One reason for this may be the innumerable atrocities that are commonly told of being committed by the participants of this voyage, thus, some of the surviving people wrote accounts to justify their actions to the Spanish Crown (Pedro de Monguía, Custodio Hernández, for instance). Gonzalo de Zuñiga wrote his version as a letter to his father, while the events were still happening. Toribio de Ortiguera wrote approximately 24 years after the journey (in 1585-86) to inform the king-to-be Felipe III of a past rebellion against the Spanish monarchic power. De Ortiguera's account was based on the oral narration of some survivors. Some say of Francisco Vazquez' chronicle that he wrote it to save his head; others say it was written to give a detailed and true historical relation of the facts.⁸

The position of authority referred by White is evident in these written chronicles. Every one of the narrators-authors, ambiguously positioned between two powers, re-positions himself in his narration under a certain legality (that of the Spanish monarchy) to save himself from death by treason. We could say that each of the narratives inaugurates its own truth based on the system of values of the Spanish Crown.

There are so many actual witnesses of Aguirre's journey through the Amazon that the fact that Herzog did not choose any of the writers of the chronicles as a narrator in his film seems, therefore, quite odd. Herzog's narrator, the monk Gaspar de Carvajal, did write an account of the first trip through the Amazon river, which took place a few decades before Aguirre's, and was led by Francisco de Orellana.⁹ So, what is the meaning of Herzog's selection of such a narrative voice and how does it affect his filmic representation of history?

The selection of the narrator's voice in the film is, certainly, significant. The conquest of the New World was both a search for material possessions and for spiritual-religious dominion. While the object of Aguirre's exploration is motivated by the search for El Dorado, the monk Carvajal represents in the story the aims of Christian missionaries to convert the natives and save their souls. Carvajal functions in the film as both witness (he is the narrator) and actor. But limits were just apparent in such an indomitable reality. In the development of the film we discover that both characters, Aguirre and Carvajal, have perhaps as many affinities as differences. Carvajal is craving to find gold as much as the other characters. Aguirre, on the other hand, has not only material aspirations, but certainly spiritual desires (delusion of grandeur? independence? rebellion ?) that other authors have characterized differently. (For instance, M. Otero Silva's novel *Aguirre, Prince of Liberty*, represents Aguirre as a predecessor of the later independence movements in America).¹⁰ The overlapping of both Aguirre's and Carvajal's functions is also conveyed towards the end of the film when the narrative voice is transferred from Carvajal to Aguirre. Carvajal dies and the delirious thoughts of Aguirre continue the tale.

These facts -the selection and evolution of the narrative voice and the blending of the aspirations of both characters-partly define the morality (I am using this term according to White) in which Herzog inscribes the film- although Herzog's morality is one that criticizes the values that motivated the whole European conquering enterprise.¹¹ This morality can be traced in other aspects of the narrative too. I will do so by analyzing the main conflict in the film (which is a tension between two legalities, two forms of control) and also the space reserved for the voices of the native and non-native others.

Within the diegesis of the film, there is a tension between two legalities -moralities: one monarchy is supplanted by another. These two legalities correspond to the two systems depicted in the written chronicles: the Spanish monarchy and Aguirre's tyranny. The formal character of the newly constituted reign of El Dorado, of which Fernando de Guzmán is elected king (a choice imposed by Aguirre, rather) is established in a written manuscript. In the same way, every other decision is given a

legal character by keeping a written record of it (taking possession of the new land, for instance). Aguirre imposes rules and behaviors based on the fear that he inspires in the rest of the characters. It is an absolutist form of power that only derives from Aguirre's will. Undoubtedly, Aguirre's abusive forms of control, as it is represented in the film, is a criticism of his position as colonizer. But it seems also an eloquent interpretation to see in the film certain admiration for Aguirre's character. It is definitely a character full of nuances and ambiguities. The film progressively penetrates his mind, and it absolutely does so towards the final sequences, when Aguirre's subjectivity takes over the narrative voice.

In between the tyrannies of the Spanish Crown and Aguirre is the church which is represented as opportunist and only aligned with the most powerful. This is clearly manifested when Doña Ines asks Carvajal for help to contain Aguirre's rebellion. The monk responds saying that: «For the good of our Lord, the church was always on the side of the strong». This position expresses, again, the critical point of view of the filmmaker.

Another important aspect of the film's narrative is the occasional spaces that it opens for the voices of the oppressed within and without the newly imposed social system. This new system (Aguirre's tyranny) actually retains the same social values as the Spanish Crown. So people are oppressed within both systems. Recounting some of the main scenes where the ethnic or gender others appear will be useful to relate to these spaces.

a) In a written title at the beginning of the film we learn that El Dorado was an invention of the Indians to misguide and easily get rid of the Spaniards.

b) A conversation occurs between Aguirre's daughter and an Indian-servant named Balthasar, in which he says his real name, Runo Rimac, and remembers that he was a prince of the land before him, prior to the coming of the Spaniards.

c) Doña Ines is treated as a child when she expresses her opinion in relation to the facts for which her husband is on trial.

d) In the same trial, a black man briefly tells his transition from one master to another, and the particular reason he was brought to this exploration: the Spaniards think that he may, like the horses, scare the Indians.

e) An Indian comes peacefully to the raft. During the encounter he puts his ear to the Bible to hear the "Word of God". Not being able to hear anything the Indian throws the Bible to the floor, for which he is immediately killed.

f) An Indian ends his flute playing and looks directly at the camera.

These scenes bring to the foreground the irrationality of the conquistadores' blindness towards different cultures and ethnicities, and also towards women in their own society. The direct look at the camera of scene f) is definitely a challenge of *an other gaze* to the controlling gaze of the filmmaker -the latter who doubtless represents the imposed gaze of European culture.

In spite of these scenes described above, and their progressive intention (they peek into the others' world from the others' point of view), such scenes are sparse in the film and do not constitute the bulk of it. Nonetheless, they are marks of the narrative that do not exist in the written sources. The written chronicles are mostly records of happenings among Spaniards and in no way see the world from the natives' viewpoint. Toribio de Ortuñuera states the Spanish-centered aim of his account:

Here you will see cruelties, passions and pitiful cases, all among Spaniards, the ones against the others, and against the service of our King, our natural master ...¹²

In Gonzalo de Zúñiga's chronicle, it is interesting and quite amusing to read some of these brief references to encounters with Indians, where he indirectly reveals the Indians' cleverness:

And they (the Indians) lied in everything they said in Pirú, because the province of Omagua -which they told us to have seen and that it was a rich land- we could never find nor even know where it was, and the Indians that we met throughout said to us that such province was further along, but they said so to throw us out of their land so that we would not eat their food. And those Indians from Brazil had said in Pirú that they had seen gold and silver just to make the Spaniards happy because they knew the Spaniards were friends of that...¹³

Quite differently from the chroniclers, Herzog does signal the unfolding of other «histories» at play. Although these histories of the oppressed are not developed to the same degree as the main history

(that of the Spaniards), by representing other subjectivities, Herzog does give new layers to the filmic story of Lope de Aguirre. Thus the film opens up spaces for the marginal - those people not contained in the colonizer's social system.

I have just used the terms history and story quite indifferently one from the other. This is to stress the narrative form of constructing history. This means that what White calls the morality of the author- the social legality where the author inserts him or herself- determines the kind of history being narrated. From this perspective, the concatenation of true facts that a historical account demands is also a subjective choice of the author (historian, filmmaker, novelist,...).

The chronicles have been the sources for four novels, one film and numerous historical accounts and analysis.¹⁴ This brings us to the provocative idea of not differentiating fiction from history, but most of the historians would not rest easily with this idea. Could *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* be an acceptable representation of history or should it be just qualified as a statement produced by the filmmaker's imagination (based on a few real facts)? Can a more realistic film (with documentary footage, for instance) be qualified as more reliable or more historical? It is worth challenging these ideas. I will do so while attempting to characterize historical representations in film and their validity as history, or otherwise.

THE SOURCES

The first and most evident distinction between historical and other kinds of representation is its close connection to a reference which belongs to the order of the real. The amount of historical data that takes part in the relation of facts as opposed to the relative freedom that an author could take in the representation of such facts is thus part of the question. Robert Rosenstone has an interesting angle on this issue. He believes that the amount of data does not necessarily determine the validity of a piece as history. A short account is no less historical than a long one.¹⁵ I think, however, that new evidence on a particular fact could open ways for new interpretations useful for either history or other kind of narratives. More evidence in a text rather than less, however, does not necessarily open a breach between historical or other accounts. In the *Los Angeles Times*, on February 22, 1993, it was announced:

Archeologists have uncovered strong evidence that the Trojan War described by the poet Homer in *The Iliad*, one of the first and most important books in Western literature, actually occurred... Until the last century, most historians believed Troy to be entirely mythical...

The article goes into details, saying that in the last century a citadel was discovered and it was found to be the site of Troy, but it was too small for a big war -like the one described *The Iliad*- to take place. The argument is clear. The successive discovery of evidence was gradually erasing the limits between what was believed to be fiction and what could now be an historical account. Historical films gather in their images a different kind of data from that of written history. The difference is related to the distinct nature of both media, which will then determine the nature of the representation.

THE REPRESENTATION

Looking at historical films in comparison with written historical accounts brings to mind fairly evident questions that relate to the general distinction between written and cinematic language. The former articulates its meaning, in structuralist terms, through the combination of syntagms in a significant chain which leads to a universe of imaginary abstractions. In the latter, the meaning is formed by a juxtaposition of concrete images which are then associated into ideas.

The choice of the mimetic elements that should come into play in a film is particularly important in the representation of history. The visual elements determine a *concrete* vision of the past, versus the abstract images that we form in our minds when we *read* history. To see actors impersonating real historical people, to choose their ways of moving and speaking, to choose a scenery, props, and every other element that finds a place in an image, could be said to be an impossibility for historical accuracy. After all, unless the recording is taken at the time of the event we are not looking at *the* people, or *the* props (we could be looking at the original location as it has been transformed through time) that were actually in existence when the facts depicted in the film took place. However, White's reference to film representation seems accurate: «The 'truthfulness' of the sequence is to be not at the level of the concrete

but rather at another level of representation, that of typification. The sequence should be taken to represent a *type* of event.»¹⁶ Although the sequence referred by White is a documentary one, his idea extends to all representation of history in film: What can only be seen on the screen are *kinds* of actions, people, movements,... that *represent* (stand for ,as well as depict) a past which is, in any case, unattainable. One can assert, for instance, that the selection of Carvajal as narrator in Aguirre...conforms to the need to represent the *kinds* of characters that undertook the colonial enterprise. Although Carvajal the historical character was not actually in Aguirre's voyage, he was in a similar one a few years before. Hence, by including him in the narrative, Herzog seems to be making a general statement about the power of the church in the whole colonial enterprise.

Not having the actual elements on the screen is not a fault of a historical representation. After all, (and in this point Rosenstone and White also agree), written discourses of history are also constructions of the imaginary .The question of historical representation then should be thought in new terms. In the interest of truth, how close do historical films need to be to the real? And in what ways?

STYLE AND GENRES

The question of whether representations of history should «appear» to be true, that is, should tend to move towards realism, is also quite complex. To talk about realism implies stylization, and both concepts require a delicate definition which is not the aim of this work. Nevertheless, I will refer to those terms as they are most commonly used.¹⁷ I have agreed with White's main thesis of considering historical discourses as constructions subject to the beliefs and values of the interpreter. In that case, the style chosen to convey the evolution of events would not necessarily be one closer to duplicating the visible world. It is a convention to think of documentaries as more historical and more realistic than any other kind of films just because they take elements from the actual reality . Documentaries can also be quite stylized. (Think, for instance, of Resnais' *Night and Fog*). And, conversely, very stylized films may give an accurate sense of a scene from reality. (Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, is a good example).

Here we return to the idea that the distinction between historical and other kind of films could be the degree of attachment to real evidence as opposed to the freedom (poetic license) taken by the author to articulate an historical episode. But this is not so simple.

Aguirre, the Wrath of God, whose sources I have discussed, has a considerable number of historical inaccuracies. The imprecise presence of Carvajal has been already documented. There are also inaccuracies in the way the death of the main characters take place. In the written chronicles of Aguirre's journey, it is recounted, for instance, that Orsúa was not hanged, as the film portrays. He was actually stabbed by many of his cohorts.¹⁸ Also, a critic denounced some historical inaccuracies in the film after noticing that in the looted and abandoned indian village, the assailants found plantains: This fruit had not yet been introduced in America.¹⁹ These inaccuracies in the mimetic and factual level might be a token of the filmmaker's freedom to historicize. However, on the technical level, there is probably no other film placed in this epoch done with such care for conveying the hardship of the conquest's enterprise. On the other hand, Herzog's version of the conquest deals to a certain degree with social tensions and power struggles of the period in quite a generalizing way. It opens spaces for situations to take place which suggest different perspectives of this history, like those of the black slave, the indians and the Spanish women. So, there is a trade-off of different elements that have to be put on the balance in order to determine the validity of this film as a historical document. Herzog's choices in this film synthesize facts and elements which undoubtedly create generalizing statements about the whole colonizing enterprise.²⁰

All our reflection up to now has followed circles trying to define the possibilities of distinguishing the historical from other discourses. Two issues seem clear, however. First, that the possibility of representing history in film requires different forms of analyzing facts and events that are related to the specificity of the medium. It seems that there is more than one way of representing history in film and depicting the social complexity of a certain period. And it also seems clear that thinking History as a totalizing system might portray a slanted perspective which would be excluding different histories -which definitely need to be recovered and considered.

The search for History or histories seems similar to the search for El Dorado. There is not one definite way to reach them and probably their existence is ever questionable.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) Rafael de ESPAÑA summarizes and classifies, in what seems a very thorough investigation, many of the films-if not all-that refer to the discovery, conquest and independence of America, made since the invention of cinema, in «España y América: 500 años de Historia a través del Cine», *Film-Historia*, Vol. II, No.3 (1992): 189-219.
- (2) Hayden WHITE, «The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality», *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No.1 (Autumn 1980): 5-27.
- (3) WHITE, *op. cit.* p.26.
- (4) *Ibid.* p. 27.
- (5) The problem of the narrative voice in this film is more complex. According to GENETTE (*Narrative Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), Carvajal would be an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. However, we will see, he has an ambiguous position because he dies towards the end of the film. Then, how can he be telling the story? We can argue that the story is written in his diary and that the manuscript represents his narrating voice. Nevertheless, it is the actual monk's voice which is over the images of the film. So, we are precisely hearing a voice from a man that is already dead, according to the diegesis of the film. This problem raises the question of the inaccuracy of using Genette's categories (which were originally conceived for literature) in film.
- (6) In *Lope de Aguirre: Crónicas*, E. Mampel González and N. Escandell Tur (comp.), Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona, 1981.
- (7) *Ibid.* Prologue. p. iv (All the references made from this book are my translation)
- (8) These authoral intentions are referred to in the introduction to each chronicle.
- (9) Referred in «Aguirre y la rebelión de los marañones», Juan José BARRIENTOS, *Cuadernos Americanos*, No.8 (March-April 1988): 92-115.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p.101.
- (11) We are here taking Herzog as the «creator» of the film text-so the «authority» that inscribes the text in a certain legality-in the same level as the chroniclers of the written sources. We are avoiding the more general and controversial discussion about the position of the author and narrator in relation to the film text. It is not a pertinent discussion for this paper.
- (12) *Lope de Aguirre*, cit., pp. 33-34.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- (14) A detailed relation of all the works related to Aguirre and what was called the rebellion of the marañones, in Barrientos' article cited above.
- (15) Robert ROSENSTONE, «History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film.» , *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No.5 (December 1988): 1178-1179.
- (16) Hayden WHITE, «Historiography and Historiophoty», *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No.5 (December 1988): 1197.
- (17) Realism, a discourse that represents most closely the appearance of the historical reality, and Stylization, a discourse with marked traces of a certain manner of representation.
- (18) *Lope de Aguirre: Crónicas*, cit., pp.12, 72, 178, 215.
- (19) Cited by BARRIENTOS, *op. cit.*, p.115.
- (20) The case of the recent fiction film *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, based on an homonymous novel, is peculiar and worth mentioning. The story is placed in current times but the characteristics and development of the plot takes us to an immediate revision of history-in particular, the history of conversion and genocide of the native people of the whole American continent. This film-although it is a non-historical fiction film-calls perhaps for more reflection on this particular episode of history than many other representations settled in the centuries of conquest and colonization.

LUISELA ALVARAY graduated from the School of Arts at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. She later earned a master's degree from the Critical Studies Program of the Film and Television Department at UCLA. Currently she is a doctoral student in the same department. In 1992, she won the award of the Cinemateca Nacional (Venezuela) with her thesis on Visual Arts. In 1994 she won the "Otis Fergusson Critical Writing Award" given by the Film and Television Department at UCLA.

